

# **radical democracy**



**interview:**  
**john raines**

**freedom rider/peace activist**  
**citizens commission**  
**to investigate the FBI**  
**helped expose COINTELPRO**



# David Olson interviews John Raines for Radical Democracy

John is a long-time peace and civil rights activist. He was a Freedom Rider in 1961, and participated in many direct actions including Mississippi Freedom Summer in '64 and the Selma to Montgomery March in '65. He recently retired as Professor of Religion at Temple University after forty-seven years.

John was also a member of the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, a group of activists based near Philadelphia. In 1971, they broke into the Media, Pennsylvania, FBI office, removing all its documents and exposing the Bureau's illegal domestic counter-intelligence program [COINTELPRO], dedicated to disrupting Civil Rights, New Left, Native American and Black Liberation movements. Its tactics included illegal surveillance, burglary, harassment, use of force, smear campaigns and even assassination.

Despite a massive manhunt, the Citizen's Commission remained anonymous and was never caught. Over forty years later, and long after the statute of limitations had run out, they have revealed themselves and told their full story.

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**Radical Democracy:** The FBI break-in took place in 1971, but by that time you had been an activist for quite awhile. Ten years earlier, in 1961, you were a Freedom Rider in the South with CORE [Congress for Racial Equality]. Could you talk about that early experience, and how it changed the arc of your life?

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**John Raines:** Well, first it's important to understand why we had to break into the FBI office. During this period, the most powerful man in Washington was J. Edgar Hoover. He didn't have to run for re-election. He was the head of the FBI for almost five decades. It was a secret and very powerful institution, and Hoover was untouchable. No president during that time could ask for his retirement. **Presidents were afraid of him. He wasn't held accountable by Congress. Newspapers and pundits left him alone.** The reason was not simply that they were afraid him, though many were, as he kept files on sexual activities of famous people, and things like that.

Hoover was not only feared, he was profoundly revered. He was the most feared and the most popular man in Washington for several generations, because he was successful at telling America who America needed to fear. His answer was that we needed to fear the international communist conspiracy that was spreading out from the Soviet Union and would take over the world. And sorry to say that we, the people of the United States, agreed with him. We let him tell us who we needed to fear and what we needed to do in order to be safe. And he became very popular man, unelected but in some sense inaugurated by the majority of the American public.

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## John Raines Interview con't

**RD:** Thankfully, we haven't had a public figure like that for awhile. At what point did you start becoming an activist?

**JR:** I got into the Civil Rights Movement in the early '60s. Yes, I became a Freedom Rider, mostly out of naiveté. I was raised in a family that had liberal values, but **I did not understand the violence I would be heading into as we rode those buses from St. Louis, Missouri, to Little Rock, Arkansas, back in July 1961.**

There were four of us: two blacks and two whites. Our purpose was to test interstate travel facilities. According to the Supreme Court, they were to be integrated, and we needed to find out if that was the case. All through the Deep South, that was of course *not* the case: they were not obeying the Supreme Court ruling. We got off the bus on July 10 at about seven thirty, and there was a mob – a white mob – just outside the Trailways bus station. The four of us went into the Whites waiting room and sat down together, and were promptly arrested.

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**The charge was “Threatened Breach of the Peace.” That was a good charge — we were properly arrested. We did want to breach the unholy peace of legalized segregation.**

The next day we went before a Judge — Quinn Glover was his name. It was a non-jury trial. He took us in the chambers and said, “I’m going to find you guilty, and I want you know why I’m going to find you guilty.” He said, with a straight face, “Well, if I don’t find you guilty I won’t get reelected.” So he found us guilty and charged us with six months in jail and a five-hundred-dollar fine. Well, the Little Rock powers-that-be did not like the idea of renewed racial turmoil because of that judgment. The city of Little Rock had paid very high economic prices because of the 1957 high school integration struggle, when Eisenhower sent in military troops to protect those nine kids. So the judge reversed himself and we continued on that Freedom Ride.

**RD:** It sounds like you were starting to get an interesting education...



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**JR:** I was beginning to undergo a very profound transformation. **I was born a white boy of class privilege:** private schools, private summer camps, elite colleges and graduate programs. Without choosing it, I was thrown into life at the top of the social hierarchy. That was the first world that I lived in, that I understood, and in a sense it was the first self I became. Nobody in those elite colleges or universities said to us, “Well, you’re living your life inside a very small bubble of power and privilege, from the top down.” They just told us we were getting a good education.

It was a good education in a narrow sense: academic skills and writing and analysis and so on. But it was not understanding America as America was, or the world as the world was. So on that day that I stood in the courtroom in Little Rock before Judge Quinn Glover, I was in a position I had never been in before. I was outside of power, regarded by power as an enemy. And that power had the power to punish me for that.

**That was the beginning of an education I wasn't supposed to get.** I was so dumb I didn't even know I needed a second education [*laughs*].

But yes, it was the beginning of an education where I looked at things not from the top down, but the bottom up.

**How does America look, how does the world look, when you look at life as it is lived and experienced from the bottom? That really was a gift, and it changed my life.**

**RD:** What was the next step in this second, bottom-up education of yours?

**JR:** I continued to be active in the Civil Rights Movement. I was part of Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. I went on the Selma March in 1965, and participated in a voter registration drive. What I learned from that was that J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI – and here's the connection – were furious at and determined to dismantle and try to destroy the Civil Rights Movement. Hoover was convinced that the Civil Rights Movement was a Communist conspiracy, and that Martin Luther King was a communist. He used all sorts of dirty tricks. We knew there was massive surveillance throughout the Civil Rights Movement, directly by Hoover's FBI. We knew that there were infiltrators and agents provocateurs, we knew that there were disinformation policies and programs.



Later, because of the break-in, we would find out about the program called COINTELPRO [Counter Intelligence Program], a secret dirty tricks program inside Hoover's FBI that successfully destroyed the lives and careers of many people in Washington, and many academics. **The program attacked Black activists and destroyed Black movements such as the Black Panthers, who were really eliminated by COINTELPRO — including the assassination of Fred Hampton in Chicago.**

We knew that was going on in the Civil Rights Movement, but after 1965 we turned our attention increasingly to the war in Vietnam. We strongly suspected Hoover was using those same tools of destruction and attacks on the First Amendment rights of dissent. But we had no way of proving it, given that Hoover was so popular and revered and feared in Washington. Until a physics professor at Haverford College, a well-known antiwar activist by the name of Bill Davedon, called my wife [Bonnie Raines] and myself in November 1970 and said, "Let's have a party." That was code within the Antiwar Movement for, "Come on over, I've got an action in mind."

**RD:** Sounds like an interesting party.



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**JR:** It turned out to be a fascinating party. [*Both laugh*] We got out to Bill's house on the campus of Haverford, just outside Philadelphia. There were ten of us to begin with. Bill said, "Well, why don't we rob the FBI, and take their files and send them to the press?"

Now the idea of robbing government files was not something new. The East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, the Berrigan Movement, had moved from nonviolent protest to nonviolent disruption by entering draft offices at night, removing A-1 files and destroying them. Back then there were no computers: it was all a paper system, so you did considerably disrupt the government and Army draft system by doing that. Of course, we had to learn robbery skills — how to get in and out under the cover of darkness without being discovered, or leaving evidence behind that could be traced to us. We learned how to do casing and clean robbery skills.

And this will amuse you, but it's true: most of the people who were our teachers were priests and nuns! Yes, sir.



**RD:** I'm not sure why, but that's good to hear!

**JR:** **That's a story in and of itself: the emergence of the Catholic Left and the Catholic Peace Movement**, something quite new in the history of the Catholic Church. It happened in the '60s and continues even to this day, with the Catholic Peace Fellowship and Catholic Worker Movement and so on.

So, Davedon, who was a member of the East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, says, "We have strong suspicions and some evidence that J. Edgar Hoover is using his dirty tricks squad to attack the war dissent movement, so why don't we rob the FBI and get evidence of all this in their own handwriting, send this to the newspapers, and see if all of a sudden the reputation of Hoover and the FBI begins to change a bit?" I think our first response was, "The FBI? Are you kidding? Come on!"

But eventually we agreed. We had to choose a name, and we chose "The Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI." Very appropriate, actually: a citizens' commission to investigate the investigators. That had never happened before.



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**RD:** It sounds extraordinary: a group of young people deciding to talk on the most powerful organization in the country. I'm wondering about the process of thinking this through, of deciding to actually do it.

**JR:** We were just common folks, and some of us, including myself and Bonnie, had young children, as did Bill Davedon. We weren't interested in becoming martyrs. It was simple: since **the folks we sent to Washington to hold important and powerful and secret organizations responsible didn't do their work, and since the newspaper people didn't do theirs, if we didn't do this, it wasn't going to get done.** We were fairly confident after casing the office: we discovered it was not secured in any fundamental way, just tumbler locks on the doors. We were quite convinced that if we were careful and left no physical evidence behind, we could do this and not be caught.

We needed to be sure that our estimate of risk was reasonable. We had to pick a night, and an important night was coming up. March 8, 1971 there was a huge boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazer. We thought that people in the apartments above would be listening to their radios, and maybe even the police would be a little less active on the streets. That did turn out to be the truth. So the eight of us decided to go ahead.

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**RD:** Once you'd completed the burglary, how long did it take to realize that the action had been a success, that you had come back with something important?

**JR:** Early the next morning we discovered files that clearly indicated that we had not wasted our time.

One of the most important was an internal file from FBI headquarters to all agents out in the field, saying to "increase the paranoia of the New Left and persuade them that there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox." That is a direct quote: *increase paranoia*. Here, clearly, is an agency that is out of control.

**Here's an agency that is targeting First Amendment rights protecting the rights of dissent, and attempting to take those rights away from us.**

Also we began to discover that it was sufficient, if you were Black, for the FBI to *suspect* you of being a dangerous human being, no matter what you were or weren't doing. Files indicated that every FBI agent



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had to have at least one informer inside the Black community to keep them informed on a monthly basis about what was going on inside that community. And I mean the Black community as such. It wasn't just churches that were under surveillance – the bars, barber shops, schools were all under surveillance. **Every place that Black people gathered was a place Hoover felt needed to be under surveillance, because it was a potentially dangerous place.**

As we began to find out what the COINTEL program was all about, we also discovered that Hoover was driven to morally defeat, to morally embarrass, to stop Martin Luther King and the program that he was leading. We found out that Hoover tried to blackmail King into committing suicide. We had documented evidence of what he was up to.

**RD:** So, you saw right away that the FBI was up to something. Was the extent, the seriousness of the program immediately clear? Or did that take time?



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**JR:** At first, no one figured out what COINTELPRO meant. It didn't seem to be important. Until 1973, when an NBC television reporter noticed this COINTELPRO - NEW LEFT notation, and he began to press the question. And he was constantly refused answers. So he sued the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act and finally a judge looked at the files and said: No, there's nothing on National Defense here. You have to give him the files.

So NBC and consequently the rest of the country got those files, and then COINTELPRO, the secret dirty tricks organization, was exposed. The fire that had dimmed down and almost gone underground, so to speak, back in 1971, was suddenly back, lit, and on.

In Washington, both the House and Senate decided to hold hearings investigating the investigators. The most important turned out to be the Senate investigation under Senator Church from Idaho. **They used the files to examine the practices of the FBI and the CIA, and concluded they had engaged in illegal and unconstitutional actions to try and squash dissent.** They also passed legislation that protected First and Fourth Amendment rights—privacy rights from excessive government intrusion, beginning in 1975. That would all change after 9/11 with the Patriot Act, when many of those restrictions were lifted.

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**RD:** It's amazing, but that battle is still being fought.

**JR:** The story of Media, Pennsylvania, is the story of how fear can drive a nation into not holding high government officials sufficiently accountable for their actions. **A nation that lets itself be governed by fear will soon become a poorly governed nation.** The fear back in the '50s and '60s was of international communism. It led to crackpot notions like the Domino Theory, and to self-muzzling by politicians, by newspaper people, by university experts. And of the folks that should be critically examining what's justified in the name of the fear of the "International communist conspiracy." Almost no politician would come out challenging the accuracy of calling what was going on in Vietnam a communist conspiracy to take over the world.

Nobody asked, "Is this discourse about the spreading of communism, and one nation falling and then the next nation, the accurate metaphor for what's going on in Vietnam? Or is Vietnam really engaged in a colonial struggle for national liberation?"

Those kinds of questions could not gain much traction because of the ideological discourse that governed the fears of the country at the time.

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**RD:** Right. When people are afraid, they're less likely to question their leaders.

**JR:** And that, unfortunately, has not gone away.

**Today the fear of terrorism monopolizes the public discourse and tends to ignore what really makes us safe on a daily basis** — and remains poorly funded by public concern and financial support.

Adequate health care for all helps us feel safe. Schools that work for all children, especially the urban and rural poor, make our world safe. Jobs for all, especially those mired in deep poverty, helps us feel safe on our city streets. Bridges and roads and water and sewage systems make our daily life safe. And investment in a carbon-free energy system will make the world safe for our grandchildren.

Be careful what you fear; pay attention to what you hope for.

**RD:** Apart from exposing the FBI's suppression of constitutionally protected activities, the burglary was one of the events that I would say dramatically — or radically — shifted Americans' perception of their own government.

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To me that's the biggest legacy of this entire story: It changed the relationship of Americans to their own government.

**JR:** Yes, that is in some ways the overarching legacy. Back in the late '60s, especially when it came to foreign policy, the American people were very uncritical of Washington, and believed what Washington people were saying about this communist conspiracy.

Our burglary of the FBI was one of the first actions that began to ask questions. **What started with a small stream would become a roaring river.** And two months after we released our documents, Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers. After the FBI break-in, the editors and publishers at the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* probably had an easier time deciding to publish, and fight the Nixon White House's attempt to keep them from doing so. They eventually got the Supreme Court decision that said, 'Prior Restraint' — I think is how they worded it — is not constitutional. You have to wait and see what the damage is. Then of course a couple years later, the Watergate scandal. And in some ways that is the overarching legacy: that we automatically trust what people in Washington tell us.

And that has both positive and negative consequences, it seems to me.

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**RD:** What are some of the negative consequences?

**JR:** Well, one of the courses I teach is Political Protest and the Culture of the '60s. One of the students once said to me, "Well, nobody in my generation trusts Washington to do anything except pursue its own self-interest." My response was, "Well, then who do you trust? Who do you trust to help protect you? Where do you take your hopes?" And there was a great silence in the classroom at that point.

So, yes, we are more realistic now about what's going on in Washington.

In a certain sense, my students answered my question two years later. Their enthusiasm for Sanders is clear. And the reason is that **Sanders has taken on**

**Washington around issues of the economy that are, and should be, central.** You and I both know that deindustrialization wiped out the American blue-collar working class. And that the economic statistics ever since the middle '70s have destroyed the working class, sending factory jobs overseas, and then there was the beginning of the ascent of the one percent and its influence in Washington.



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**Bernie Sanders has touched upon the student anger. And behind the anger and cynicism was a realistic recognition that they didn't need no government, or less government, they need better government.**

And that's what Sanders' has tapped into. He has rescued the *S* word and the *R* word and put into suspicion the *C* word. That is, he's rescued the word *socialism*: that all of a sudden has become respectable again. He's rescued the word *revolution*, which all of a sudden now has become something people are beginning to think we need. And he's put into question a word that was never put in question before, namely, *capitalism*,

**RD:** Those words and that message seem to be resonating with a lot of people, beyond students.

**JR:** The young people, college students, the old Left, what's left of the New Left, the minority populations, Latinos and Latinas, African Americans and women, and immigrants – that's a powerful coalition. I don't think Sanders is going to be able to get the nomination – I think that will go to Hillary.



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But what Sanders has started is, I think, a new movement. A kind of Tea Party of the Left. And boy oh boy, do we need that kind of movement in this country at this time.

**RD:** For a lot of us, it started with Occupy Wall Street, this thinking in terms of big change again, or radical change.

**JR:** Yes! Big change. Or “revolution” in quotation marks. **The changes we need are systemic changes, not just personnel changes.**

And we've got to get a reversal on that Citizens United decision that turned corporations into persons. And behind that we have to get a reversal on that Buckley decision that said that money is speech. There's absurdity piled upon absurdity here: money is not speech. Big-time money is power, not speech. And power, when it comes to democratic process, must be opposed by an equal power, otherwise it becomes an oligarchy.

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**RD:** Yes! realizing that these battles to create a more just society have been going on for a long time. That you're joining a historical tendency or movement — not just striking out on your own, for the first time.

**JR:** You have to have the sense that: “**I’m part of an intergenerational struggle.**” I won’t see the results that I would like to see, but I will move the flag down the field a ways. And there’s always going to be somebody there when my time is up who is going to pick up that flag, and carry it forward.”

I think that’s a crucial realization, to keep up hope. I wrote one time: “Anything truly significant always appears impossible, until in retrospect it appears inevitable.” And I think that there’s truth in that.

We need to know that history shows that suddenly, history can break open. And often times it’s totally unexpected.

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Who, in 1959, could possibly have forecasted that five years later there would be a Civil Rights bill? Nobody who was being “realistic.”

**There's a sneaky side of history that suddenly a future really breaks out, and history becomes History, rather than just an infinite repetition of what went on the day before.**

**RD:** Before we have these moments of great change, it seems necessary to first accept the idea that things *can* change, that there are other possibilities, and that you can effect those possibilities. Some call it using your radical imagination.

In that same piece you just quoted, *Making Global Capitalism More Just*, you talk about creative naiveté, which sounds a lot like radical imagination.

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You wrote,

*“Creative naiveté begins with the refusal to accept the given world and its power relations as finished and final. Indeed, the naiveté may lie with the so-called realists, who cannot conceive of a future that in any fundamental way departs from the recent past. But that is the wisdom of the old and the comfortable.”*

**JR:** I think “creative naiveté” turns out not to be naïve, it turns out to be realism. And the realistic people turn out to be the naïve ones. That’s happened a number of times. Climate change people had always been labeled by the so-called “realists” as being naïve — when in fact the people dragging their feet on global environmental issues are the ones who were naïve, and the naïve ones turned out to be realistic.

**RD:** It seems crucial to allow yourself to think of different power relations, or a different future, and to start working towards that, even if you don’t know exactly how, or when, it will work out.



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**JR:** And in some ways that's also something spiritual, at least for me. My own mentor was Reinhold Niebuhr, my teacher at Union Theological Seminary. He once said, "Nothing truly worth doing will be finished in my lifetime, and therefore we live by faith."

There's some truth in that. It doesn't necessarily mean faith in God or something, but faith in the human prospect.

**RD:** And maybe faith that someone will pick up the flag and continue forward.

**JR:** Yes, exactly.

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